

Explanation of Position on a High-Level Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS

Courtney R. Nemroff

Deputy U.S. Representative to the Economic and Social Council

New York, New York

June 8, 2021

AS DELIVERED

Thank you, Mr. Chair. First, I would like to speak to the amendments presented by the Russian Federation, and then I would like to speak to the declaration as a whole. And colleagues, forgive me if the length of my statement is a little bit longer than usual.

Russia's new amendments target the majority – if not all – of the most sensitive and complex issues that the global HIV response must address full on if we are to meet our 2030 goals and targets. As you rightly point out, distinguished representative of Australia, the new Russian amendments are indeed severe and would delete references to key populations, persons who use drugs, harm reduction, and persons of various genders, leaving scant or no reference to these important issues and populations. Additionally, the amendments question the core of the UNAIDS mandate and the institution's credibility as a UN organizing body for the global AIDS response. We request a vote on these hostile amendments, and we urge all delegations to vote against them.

Now, I will turn to the political declaration as presented by the President of the General Assembly, which – I may add – reflects the heroic efforts of the co-facilitators Australia and Namibia, and the tireless efforts of all negotiators from all delegations. And we wish to thank you all sincerely.

Mr. Chair, 40 years ago this week, when the world recorded the first five cases of HIV/AIDS, the international community failed to respond to the emerging HIV/AIDS pandemic. Forty years later, we continue to stymie efforts to actually end AIDS and – in fact – as a result of our inaction, contribute to more stigma and discrimination of the people most in need of our public health interventions. The cost has been the estimated 32.7 million people who have lost their lives to AIDS-related illnesses globally, including 700,000 people in the United States.

Rather than follow the science, we are mired in fighting over social policies – policies that, frankly, enabled the virus to deeply root itself among all people. Forty years ago, fear and discriminatory policies left our citizens dying, often alone. We deprived them of the very dignity and respect the guiding documents of this organization enumerate. But for the bold leadership of activists and epidemiologists, nurses and laypeople, and far too few politicians, more would have been needlessly taken from us.

To end HIV/AIDS by 2030, we need bold leadership. We need the support of the very people and groups that too frequently have been excluded from this meeting and so many like it. Precious time is wasted by efforts trying to make the circle of people fighting the virus smaller rather than welcoming everyone's contributions. We spend our time fending off efforts to erode the process of innovation that made breakthroughs once thought impossible, possible. We find ourselves captive not to those making huge contributions to actually end AIDS, but those still denying the science of how it spreads.

As we mark this important occasion and attempt to honor those abandoned 40 years ago, the United States is saddened by our collective lack of bold leadership. The political declaration before us – put simply – does not measure up.

We started this process with a strong, ambitious declaration. The declaration was evidence- and science-based in its assessment of the challenges faced in the global fight against HIV/AIDS. Two months ago, the draft before us was strident and clear in its solutions. The text we are adopting today, lacks the ambition needed to meet the stated goals of this high-level meeting – ending inequalities and ending AIDS.

For two months, our delegations met for round after round of negotiations to craft a balanced declaration, reflecting everything from the policies needed to end this pandemic to the undisputed reality of national sovereignty. And yet, people everywhere are deprived of real-world solutions contained in this declaration. It was by no means perfect, but it was far better than the text before us now. This declaration is unquestionably weaker and weakened by a minority of delegations. Rather than negotiate in good faith with an aim to establish balanced compromises and consensus texts, they hold UN documents hostage with an aim to extract uninspired and often regressive policies. This document – like so many others – does not have the best interest of key populations or the global fight against HIV/AIDS in mind.

It is clear for some countries that “contexts” include cultural and moral values. And, we know that some social norms, under the guise of cultural and moral values, can be misaligned with an effective AIDS response. The movement of the sovereignty clause to a more prominent place in the document enables countries to undermine their commitments to end HIV/AIDS by 2030 through the guise of “national contexts.”

Comprehensive sexuality education and the recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity are central to an effective HIV/AIDS response. HIV prevention and treatment programs that do not recognize the diversity of populations and their unique needs will not successfully stop HIV infection or ensure that all persons living with HIV/AIDS have access to treatment. For these reasons, the United States will disassociate from Paragraph 60g. We regret deletion of the

already weakened compromise language on comprehensive sexuality education based on agreed language. We must continue to build on the 2016 declaration, in order to ensure that key populations, especially youth living with HIV/AIDS, get the support they need from their families, nations, and international community.

We must reaffirm the rights of women and all people to have freedom and control over their sexual and reproductive health. We will continue to work collaboratively to achieve affirmation of comprehensive sexuality education, recognizing how fundamental it is to concrete progress and leaving no one behind.

Stigma and discrimination flourishes with an unwillingness to recognize diversity and to shape national, regional, and local responses to address the contexts and challenges of key populations most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. While we appreciate the gains we made on additional references to key populations, especially in the context of combating stigma and discriminatory laws, we also lost references to non-binary members of key populations – this does a disservice to those excluded from this year's political declaration.

The responses needed to combat HIV today, and for the years to come, are not the same as what was needed in 2016. The HIV epidemic has evolved as have programs and services. As many populations have benefited from HIV prevention and treatment programs, there are other populations left behind who remain at high risk. Gender inequality, in all its diversity, is one of the, if not the most significant barrier to ending the AIDS epidemic. Political statements should show commitments and must focus on those issues most critical to achieving our collective goal.

Language matters. Science matters. Political commitment to ending AIDS matters.

The HIV response will use differentiated approaches that are tailored to the needs of specific contexts, populations and locations, and prioritize the people most in need. Outdated and ineffective interventions must be dropped and replaced with those that effectively reach key populations: adolescent girls and young women, children and men. These populations – these individuals – remain at risk for HIV and have clear unmet needs. We must meet these needs.

Mr. Chair, we have come a long way since the early days of the HIV pandemic. Much work remains to be accomplished. We look forward to working in partnership with UNAIDS and partners to address the needs of those that remain on the margins of the global response. They have to be at the center of this response if we are going to reach our collective goals of ending AIDS. Ambition is needed.

And I close by saying that if a vote is called on this declaration as it is presented by the President of the General Assembly, the U.S. will support the PGA's text. We will vote yes in favor of this

text. And we will disassociate from Paragraph 60g for the reasons I just enumerated. We urge all Member States to reject the amendments presented today by the Russian Federation.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

###